

NONFICTION

Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto

Harry Freedman

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Categories
Arts & Culture
History

Review

By Eleanor Foa – July 8, 2024

Travelers from all around the world flock to Venice to see its Jewish ghetto. Yet few are aware of the critical role the ghetto played in the cultural, intellectual, and financial history of Europe.

Harry Freedman's new book is fascinating and thorough. It's a total pleasure to discover why restricting Jews physically turned out to unleash them creatively.

Erected in 1516 and dismantled by Napoleon in 1798, Venice's ghetto was the world's first ghetto. It became an epicenter of intellectual life for Jews and non-Jews. Living conditions were miserable, but Hebrew printing and scholarship flourished, as did global commerce and trade, which brought wealth to the Venetian Republic.

Among the most prominent non-Jews to consult with rabbinic scholars was an emissary of King Henry VIII (the king was searching for a way out of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon). This interaction eventually brought the practices of Jewish moneylenders to the attention of English playwrights, including Shakespeare. Freedman speculates freely about the meaning and historical context of the character of Shylock, though it is only one of many threads in his book. Others include the role of women in the ghetto's commerce and salons, the rise and fall of Kabbalism, recurrent plagues, and the gradual permeability between wealthy Venetians and Jewish merchants. As one source put it, "When it came to culture, the ghetto walls were porous."

Shylock's Venice is a must-read for anyone who has been to Venice or ever plans to go.

Eleanor Foa is an author, journalist, and corporate writer. Her memoir MIXED MESSAGES: Reflections on an Italian Jewish Family and Exile *comes out in November 2019. Her work appears in national newspapers, magazines and websites. She is the author of* Whither Thou Goest *and* In Good Company, *President of Eleanor Foa Associates (eleanorfoa.com), past president of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and received literary residencies at Yaddo and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.*

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